

2. Sexual Life between Maturity and Marriage

After reaching maturity, the girl is called ngān III, and the young man nkā³ I; for both there is also the term band³man, plural of ndūman = young man or girl at the age of being in love.

Thus the name itself shows under what sign the subsequent period of life is lived. Free love in the boldest sense of the word prevails. The girl may give away her favors without inhibition to whom and whenever she desires to do so, and she need only observe the religious rule that prohibits sexual intercourse during the day and the social rule that prohibits intercourse between blood relatives. Otherwise there is no barrier; members of the same age group come together and make thorough use of their freedom. In the initial period after maturity, to be sure, sexual desire is dampened by the moral admonitions of the cults with their proclamation of the sinfulness of sexual intercourse. This sinfulness, combined with physical satiety and psychic revulsion, produces a "moral hangover"; however, such considerations and feelings are soon overcome. As in eating, so in their love life, the Fangwe know no moderation. They empty the cup of joy to the lees. Later on, especially when the Fangwe has acquired several wives, he tends to develop a more business-like attitude towards sexual love, in place of the youthful amours which alternate unsteadily between ungoverned passion and its aftereffects, psychic unease.

In view of this extensive free love, it goes without saying that the virginity of his future wife plays no role in the man's choice. Indeed, the presence of a hymen (ā³dehā) is usually scarcely noticed and /254/ to some is totally unknown. Around the age of 15 years it is supposed to be destroyed by boys of the same age.

As for their libidinal drive, the girls are generally not inferior to the boys. However, we may say that for the girls potency alone is as a rule the deciding factor in the choice of a friend. This fact is well expressed in the various dance songs at the Mhale (which, incidentally, were brought to the Fang and Nrum by the sexually loose Junde) as, for example, in the following complaint.

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in all this part of central Africa,
where the ox is unknown because of
trypanosomiasis.

the produce of hunting and fishing, and these exist until the time
of puberty. They signify, according to L. Martrou, that in the
family group there should be "no useless mouth," ... "but rather
arms and hearts capable of defending and enriching it." (2) Thus

2. L. Martrou, *Les "Eks" des
Mfang* [The "Eks" of the Fang]
op. cit.

[34] It is forbidden to cohabit with a woman before being circumcised (3)

3. V. Largeau, op. cit. article:
Interdit [Interdict].

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In the same way various rites mark the steps of this ascent: the
rite of the Sab for the ten-year-old children; (4) circumcision,

4. M. Bertaud in his thesis on the
Souleu of the Cameroons, a related
nation, speaks of a less degraded
form of the Sab which was the cen-
ter of a true "society of men" now
almost vanished.

which is not accompanied by any initiation (but seems rather to
bear public witness to virility and to show the individual as an
active male), and above all, the "revelation" of the Sié. When
the young man joins the company of men, he has experienced in
various degrees of intensity [153] this biological, social, and
spiritual dependence on his ancestors (nyam) and on his elders
(nyamé). To them he owes his life, his security, his social
existence. Even after having crossed the various steps and being
able to take full part in the assembly of men, he receives from

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541 them various interdicts that testify to his new state and remind
578 him of the obligation to submit to those who have made him a
185 man, a complete Fang. (1)

1. Cf. M. Briault, op. cit., pp.
183-184.

541 For a long time he submits to this superiority of his elders,
885 who intervene with the ancestors, the source of prosperity and
688 power, who permit him to fulfill and increase himself by marriage and the possession of posterity, by controlling the circulation of bride prices and women. Thus the male life curve reaches a maximum which corresponds to the social influence of the nyamdeh, decreases as old age approaches (we have already stressed the tendency in the past to discard the "grandfather," nyam), and increases infinitely after death, which gives him the quality of "ancestor" with limitless power on behalf of the living. Childhood and old age, representing the "low" points of this curve, are preparation for the two "high" states which are characterized by an increase in power and autonomy.

541 In ancient Fang society dependence guaranteed material
578 and spiritual security. It was centered on the relation between
182 the begetter (faa) and the begotten (limb wlim) rather than on that between the dominating one and the one dominated. We have frequently stressed the leveling tendency existing in the heart of the nd'e lile and the dangers threatening any pre-eminence acquired by personal right. The just distribution of women, wealth, and tasks is expected from the "elder," not any domination. In another respect, during the period of conquest, attempts at domination and the establishment of excessive personal power were limited by the important role of the "warrior" (who best incarnates the qualities which caused Dr. Cureau to compare the Fang to "modern Spartans") and the threat of rupture in the heart of a grouping which needed to remain sufficiently large and coherent. An equilibrium may arise between the power of the "elder ones" (religious and political pre-eminence) and the power of the young men (martial pre-eminence). It involves particularly the rigid regulation of the circulation of the women, the possibility for them

no more than a mere conventional taboo, as with certain words considered crude in French. At birth and until weaning a baby is nyen (nyen) or nyen.

After weaning, which usually occurs when the child begins to walk by itself, between eighteen months and two years, the nyen becomes a nyen (nyen) = boy; nyen = girl; an uncircumcised boy is called more specifically nyen.

Circumcision takes place between eight and twelve years of age (1), before the first premonitory sign of puberty, especially the

1. In former times it was sometimes put off until the youth had killed his first enemy. See Trilles (no. 166) and Lagueau (no. 48).

appearance of the first pubic hair (nyen, related to the verb nyen = to do well; correctly, on purpose, from the masculine root FA7). The circumcised boy, nyen, "cut one," becomes an adolescent, nyen, a term also meaning "son" (in relation to a man, see above, p. 63). Correspondingly, a pubescent girl becomes nyen (which can mean at the same time young girl, daughter of a man, or moon: nyen nyen, "to see the moon," that is, to be menstruating), or also nyen. /37/

The adolescent boy is still nyen, uninitiated. The missions have now adopted the term nyen, "initiated," to denote church members. Formerly, one became nyen after initiation, mostly in the great national nyen initiation, the members of which were called nyen (probably "child of the death /nyen/ of the nyen"; compare this with the joking relationship, nyen = the dying /nyen/ of the nyen).

After initiation, that is, somewhere between the sixteenth and twentieth year, a young man though of military age was not yet a nyen, a true person. This he became only upon marriage, when he attained what might be considered his legal, civil, even economic, majority.

A girl, nyen, who became nyen or nyen, a true woman, by losing her virginity, after marriage was nyen, a /married/ lady, and nyen or nyen, a matron, when she had brought up her first children. A man with grandchildren was nyen, an elder, usually around forty; this was the highest possible social position. Indeed,

7. The Position of Women(1)

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1. J. Binet, "Condition des femmes /The Position of Women/, " Cahiers internationaux de sociologie, 20, 1956, Presses Universitaires de France, and "Statut des femmes dans le Sud-Cameroun /Status of Women in the Southern Cameroons/, " to appear in Recueil de la Société Jean Bodin, 1956, Edit. of the Librairie Encyclopédique, Brussels.

If the older people are to be believed, the position of women according to orthodox custom was that of minors. However, there is nothing in traditional theory that justifies such a negative attitude towards women: some clans name women among their eponymous heroes, and there are legends attributing to the creator god (Zimbé) a daughter in whose honor certain rites were performed. At the present time the tribal societies making an effort to revive the old clans and to revise their codes of manners and their customary laws always keep a place for women at the core of the executive /État-major/, but very often the role of women is secondary: they are dancers, singers, organizers of dances, or stewards watching over followers—in short they only carry out men's orders. Women are also sometimes associated with men in religious /confessional/ societies (Protestant or, more frequently, Catholic), but mostly they form separate groups, formerly so-called secret societies, today Christian devotional confraternities, which enable women to meet together, to set up a hierarchy and have leaders of their own. Women do not actually participate in the life of the community /cité/ or, better, they form a community among themselves, distinct from that of men.

In law women seem to be at a disadvantage, but it is not clear that they owe this to genuine antifeminism. In fact, no one is perfectly free in customary law; only the patriarchal head of a family possesses full legal capacity. Marriage does not confer majority on a woman, and a girl possesses greater independence than does a married woman. In the sexual sphere this is clear: illegitimate births involve no disgrace; a child is always welcome. If born before marriage, it belongs to the mother's family. And it is not unusual for respectable fathers to wait until a daughter has borne children before marrying her off.